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Rockingham voters mark ballots for change

Dunbar, North, Cowan elected to Rockingham Selectboard; Paul Obuchowski returned to UHS #27 school board

By Robert F. Smith
The Commons

ROCKINGHAM—Town Meeting voting on April 1 and 2 brought several changes to school boards and the Selectboard. It was a particularly rough night for those seeking reelection.

The incumbents — Rockingham School Board chair

Priscilla Lambert; Deborah Wright, who was also running for a one-year Selectboard seat; and Bellows Falls Union High School board chair Jason Terry — were all defeated by large margins.

John Dunbar was elected for the first time to one of two one-year seats on the Selectboard, with a commanding 544 votes.

■ SEE ROCKINGHAM ELECTION, A4

‘Nobody needs a 7,000 square foot house anymore’

A state program encourages ‘mom and pop’ landlords to develop affordable housing

By Ellen Pratt
The Commons

BRATTLEBORO—A state pandemic-era program aimed at encouraging “mom-and-pop landlords” to create affordable housing is set to launch a second

round of grant funding this spring.

With millions of dollars to be awarded statewide, the Vermont Housing Improvement Program (VHIP) provides these local housing developers up to \$50,000 per unit for the rehabilitation and construction of rental apartments.

VHIP was launched in 2022 to address the state’s declining quality of rental units and to provide suitable housing for Vermonters experiencing homelessness.

The program requires landlords to rent at affordable, fair market prices as established by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, and to work with local coordinated entry lead organizations, such as Groundworks Collaborative in

■ SEE VHIP FINANCING, A5

Balint seeks second term

No challengers as yet, but U.S. representative says she is working hard to help Democrats retake the House

By Joyce Marcel
The Commons

BRATTLEBORO—There are times when Vermont likes to go all in, so in 2022, when it decided to send its first female to Congress, it chose Becca Balint, an idealistic lesbian politician, a progressive Democrat, a Brattleboro resident, a mother of two, a former teacher, and the former president pro tem of the Vermont Senate.

“It’s been an incredible joy and a privilege,” Balint

■ SEE BALINT, A3



Some of the 1,700 girls entered in the annual Girls on the Run 5K Run/Walk pass the starting line in 2012.

ALEXANDRA OSSOLA, COMMONS FILE PHOTO

Vermont’s chapter of Girls on the Run celebrates 25 years of cultivating young hearts, minds, and spirits

By Victoria Chertok
The Commons

BRATTLEBORO—In 1999, when her daughters were young, Nancy Heydinger says she “wanted to find a way to ensure that they would grow up loving themselves, feeling complete.”

“I wanted them to celebrate and embrace their natural gifts, to know that what they communicated was of value, and to believe that they could make an important impact in their communities and in our world,” the Vernon resident told *The Commons*.

So Heydinger looked at opportunities for her daughters and found that “there weren’t

a lot of opportunities for girls that were solely for girls.”

That was the impetus for her founding Girls on the Run Vermont (GOTRVT) that year.

Since the Vermont chapter began in 1999, more than 30,000 girls in the Green Mountain State have participated.

Girls on the Run was originally founded by Molly Barker in Charlotte, North Carolina, in 1996, and since then more than 2.5 million girls have taken part nationwide in a full life-lessons curricula for girls that includes cultivating a love of movement.

Barker recognized a need for girls to have their own spaces, noting that there were already plenty of spaces for men and

■ SEE GOTRVT TURNS 25, A2



COURTESY PHOTO

Rachel Desautels of Williston, left, succeeded Nancy Heydinger of Vernon as executive director of Girls on the Run Vermont in 2018. Heydinger stepped down after nearly two decades of leading the nonprofit program.

A year after tragedy, Groundworks looks forward



KEVIN O’CONNOR, VTDIGGER.ORG

A birdhouse sits across the street from the nonprofit Groundworks Collaborative’s drop-in center and overnight shelter on South Main Street in Brattleboro.

‘We’ve learned we cannot be all things to all people,’ says Libby Bennett, the nonprofit’s new leader. ‘The needs have grown a lot more complex.’

By Kevin O’Connor
VtDigger

BRATTLEBORO—Five years ago, Groundworks Collaborative — a nonprofit whose tagline promises “basic needs met with dignity” — hoped to help a rising number of people sleeping on the streets by unveiling plans for a \$3.3 million drop-in center and overnight shelter.

“Thinking back to that moment, we thought, ‘This is the way,’” Libby Bennett, then in

charge of the organization’s development and communications office, recalled of the overall trajectory.

No one foresaw the seismic shift that would come with the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic, the expansion of the state’s emergency housing voucher program, or the killing of Leah Rosin-Pritchard, a Groundworks social worker, on April 3, 2023, allegedly by a resident of its longer-stay Morningside House.

■ SEE GROUNDWORKS, A8

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■ Balint

told *The Commons* when she announced her re-election campaign late last month. “And it feels like an amazing outgrowth of the work that I did at first as a teacher and then as a state senator. To really focus on how to improve lives for people. So that’s, by far, the most exciting opportunity for me — to try to make some progress on the issues that really matter to people in Brattleboro and across the state.”

But she entered the 117th Congress which Ohio Republican Mike Turner, the chairman of the House Intelligence Committee, has called the “chaos caucus.”

And Balint agrees with Turner. “It is no secret that this has been a Congress for the record books,” Balint said. “And not in a good way. We started the chaos in January. We had to go 15 rounds for a speaker.”

That speaker, California Republican Kevin McCarthy, lasted only 269 days, the third-shortest speakership in history. Then he retired from the House. His replacement was Mike Johnson, a Republican from Louisiana.

“We got another speaker and just before this break, we had [Georgia Republican] Marjorie Taylor Greene introducing a vacate-the-chair motion to get rid of Speaker Johnson,” Balint said. “So, more of the same, right? More of the same chaos?”

Balint does not believe Greene is serious about impeaching Johnson.

“It’s possible that she never ever does anything with this and that it was just a fundraising strategy,” Balint said. “She dropped it in the last few hours before a two-week break, and she knew nothing could happen. So it sure looks to all of us that this is just a ploy to raise money over the break, and more games. Because they don’t have the votes. They don’t have the votes to elect a more extreme person. We’ve been through this.”

Face-to-face with cynicism

Balint serves on the House Judiciary Committee with Greene and other far-right MAGA Republicans. She said the cynicism can be demoralizing.

“It’s certainly been frustrating for me to sit in Judiciary every day and see the cynicism, the meanness of spirit, and the constant attacks on the trans community and their parents and their allies,” Balint said.

“That has been so, so painful to watch, both in Judiciary and on the floor of the House,” she continued. “This was a concerted effort they made; the GOP tried to settle on an issue that would rile up the base, and they settled on beating up on trans kids and their families. And so that has been one of the most painful things to be pushing back against, week after week.”

Not only does this represent base cynicism, Balint said, it represents real cowardice on the part of many Republicans.

“I see my colleagues across the aisle, many of whom I know on a personal basis, and many of them know that Trump and Trumpism is bad for their party,” Balint said. “It’s bad for Congress. It’s bad for the country. And they can’t seem to find the courage to stand up against it. That certainly been incredibly challenging.”

And the last six months, “dealing with the Israel and Gaza war, of course, have been profoundly painful and challenging for so many of us in Congress,” she said.

High points of the first term

As difficult as the 117th Congress has been, Balint is enthusiastically positive about her time in Washington.

“It’s really been an honor to serve Vermont in Congress,” she said. “It has been an incredible joy and a privilege to really focus on how to improve lives for people.”

Recently, Balint introduced a bill that would, if passed, pour money into housing construction across the country.

“By far, the most exciting opportunity for me is to try to make some progress on the issues that really matter,” she said. “As we all well know, we have a housing crisis. And I was so excited to be able to introduce my Community Housing Act, and feel like I’ve really planted a flag in the ground about the level of investment needed for housing.”

Despite Congressional chaos, Balint, part of the leadership of both the Equality Caucus and the Progressive Caucus, has managed to make some inroads on the national stage.

“I’m able to have real conversations with the leaders of both those caucuses,” she said. “They then interface with Democratic leadership. What’s been terrific about this leadership team of Hakeem Jeffries [D-N.Y., the House minority leader], Katherine Clark [D-Mass., the

minority whip], and Pete Aguilar [D-Calif., the chair of the House Democratic Caucus] is that they are people who really listened to the rank-and-file. We have regular meetings with them.”

Balint feels she has even made headway on the Judiciary Committee.

“I feel like I’ve been able to really show my leadership,” she said. “We’re pushing back on the outrageous ways that they’re attacking. Whether it’s reproductive rights, or the rights of immigrants and migrants, or the queer and trans community, I feel like I am making a difference there. And I’m getting a name for myself in the caucus as someone who is a workhorse and not a show horse.”

Balint is also proud of the work she has done on mental health — another of her key issues.

“I cannot wait until Democrats are back in the majority so that we can really invest in medical support at the level that we need,” she said. “I was able to secure \$11 million to fund 16 projects around the state. I know Vermonters hear a lot about the dysfunction in Congress, but my team works really hard to make sure that they work closely with the Appropriations Committee to get those projects funded.”

Another high point for Balint was being able to help almost 1,500 Vermonters with issues related to security or immigration issues.

“And many people needed help with looking for resources after that terrible flooding this summer,” she said.

Balint and her staff have also formed a strong working relationship with Vermont Senators Peter Welch and Bernie Sanders. Earmarks are local projects specifically targeted to receive federal money, or “Vermont taxpayer dollars coming back to Vermont,” as Welch said.

And, this year, Balint found \$1.5 million for Grace Cottage Hospital. The little hospital in Townshend is planning a new, \$20 million clinic to replace the existing Grace Cottage Family Health buildings.

“All along Route 30 from Brattleboro up to towns like Jamaica, we know that there are rural health care needs that are met so wonderfully by Grace Cottage,” Balint said. “It’s such a resource for so many of those Vermonters living on those dirt roads up there. And there are a lot of elderly folks who get their service at Grace Cottage.”

Israel, and Ukraine

In February, Balint and some of her Democratic colleagues made a stealth trip to Israel to get some firsthand information about what was happening.

“As difficult as this is, I’m very clear, having spent time in Israel and in the West Bank, that Netanyahu and this extremist government has shown utter disregard for the lives of Palestinians,” Balint said. “And it has to stop.”

She said that she is “clear that we need an immediate ceasefire” and the release of all the hostages kidnapped from Israel on Oct. 7, 2023.

“And ultimately, the way for people to secure peace and security for Palestinians and Israelis, [is that] we need a two-state solution,” said Balint, who believes most Vermonters agree with her.

Her constituents “want me to do my homework, and they want me to think carefully and deeply about this issue,” she said. “And I’m doing just that.”

Right now, the MAGA Republicans are holding back approval for additional funding for Ukraine as deals with the start of a third year of a brutal invasion by Russia. Balint wants to see that funding released.

“That has been a very troubling development,” Balint said. “The Republicans have become apologists for Putin. And we know that every day that goes by when we are not supplying Ukraine is another day that Putin is celebrating and planning his next move.”

She said that seasoned Democrats and Republicans “cannot believe that this is where we are, that a major party in the United States is protecting an autocrat. It’s shocking.”

Campaigning

At the moment, no one has thrown a hat in the ring to challenge Balint; people have until May to file. This might be the first uncontested race she has ever run. But she is still fundraising to pay for television ads, mailers, buttons, and other campaign merchandise — but, most of all, for staff salaries.

“We know from our first campaign that the way that we were really able to win was that we had an incredible get-out of the organizing team on the ground,” Balint said. “That’s what enabled us to really overcome what so many people said was impossible

FROM SECTION FRONT

— that someone from Windham County could win statewide.”

She noted that the campaign “engaged a lot of young voters around the state. So the bulk of where our money goes is in organizing. And you have to pay people, you know. That’s really important to us.”

During her first run for Congress, Balint became collateral damage when a corrupt group of left-wing cryptocurrency financiers unaffiliated with her campaign gave more than \$1 million to a political action committee (PAC) unrelated to the candidate. The money paid for a blitz of television and direct mail ads — ads that she could not control or stop.

“We didn’t know any of the folks who were engaged with our campaign,” she said. “It was spent outside of the campaign in support of me, but I had no control over it. I wasn’t in charge of the message. I wasn’t in charge of what kind of pieces of mail were going out.”

As a result, “a lot of Vermonters were very frustrated with the kind of mail that was coming from organizations that I have no control over,” Balint said. “That is why we need campaign finance reform.”

This time around, she said she is taking precautions.

For starters, “We’re not taking any crypto money,” Balint said. Nor will the campaign take money from corporate donors or from corporate PACs.

“We’re doing everything that we can to run a campaign that’s funded by the small-dollar donors,” she said.

While she campaigns in Vermont, Balint is also campaigning in other states for other Democratic Party candidates.

“One of the things that’s so important to me is that it is absolutely not just about my race,” Balint said. “It’s also about making sure that we have the numbers to be able to flip the House.”

Otherwise, she said, “we are not going to be able to get the work done that needs to be done, like housing and investments in mental health, in climate action, and of course, reproductive rights.”

Among those candidates are the first trans woman running for Congress: Sarah McBride from Delaware.

“She’s become a friend, and I love supporting her,” Balint said. “She’s come up through the state legislature. And she’s been in an incredibly effective elected official and legislator,” she added.

Balint has been working on some campaigns through the Equality PAC, an organization that supports “people from the LGBTQ community across the country” and which was very supportive of her first race.

A “sleeper” Senate race that Balint is watching closely is Andy Kim’s race in New Jersey. “He and I became friends, and it looks like he is going to be successful,” Balint said. “He would be the first Korean-American in the Senate. He is someone who inspires me.”

What’s ahead?

What can Vermonters expect if Balint is elected to a second term?

“Well, first and foremost, I focus on the work,” Balint said. “And I understand that if I lose heart, if I become cynical, then I can’t do the work that needs to be done to honestly bring this country back from the brink of losing our democracy.”

She predicted that she will “need to focus my energy on the opportunities that we have



RANDOLPH T. HOLHUT/THE COMMONS

U.S. Rep. Becca Balint, left, and Andrea Seaton, Senior Director of Development, Marketing & Community Relations for Grace Cottage Family Health & Hospital in Townshend, look at the plans for a \$20 million expansion of Grace Cottage’s primary care clinic during an April 1 news conference.

ahead, in flipping the House in 2024. Because that will mean investments in housing, in mental health support, in reproductive rights, in expanding the Child Tax Credit — which we know works to bring millions of children out of poverty.”

Meanwhile, she reflects on the “real consequences of having a Democratic majority. We saw that in the huge infrastructure bill that we were able to get passed. So it becomes very tangible to me when I focus on how productive we can be.”

Balint said she has a good team ready to support her efforts in Congress.

“This is a piece that I think a lot of folks don’t realize,” she said. “When you’re a member of Congress, you are only as successful as the team around you. And I have a terrific team — not just in Vermont, but also in D.C.”

The team members “work well together,” Balint said, adding that “they understand that their most important job is serving Vermonters.”

“And I just like them all

individually,” she continued. “As a group, they crack me up. That’s a lot of how I keep my spirits up — through people who will focus on the work in the same way that I do.”

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ECO AmeriCorps seeks applicants

MONTPELIER—The Vermont Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) is seeking applicants for the Environmental Careers and Opportunities (ECO) AmeriCorps program. The program provides ECO AmeriCorps members with opportunities to explore conservation careers and gain technical skills to protect Vermont's environment.

"Since 2015, 243 ECO AmeriCorps members have helped partners with projects across the state," DEC Commissioner Jason Batchelder said in a news release. "These rising environmental leaders have committed over 400,000 hours of service to improve water quality, increase climate resiliency, reduce waste, and conserve our natural resources."

DEC will accept 23 full-time members to serve from September 2024 to August

2025. The deadline to apply is Friday, May 10. Highly motivated individuals with a background in environmental conservation or education, natural or agricultural sciences, environmental studies, engineering, government or policy, communications or outreach, event planning, or other related fields are encouraged to apply.

Members are paired with host sites statewide and serve under their supervision. Over the past 10 years, sites have ranged from municipalities, conservation districts, and solid waste management districts to other state departments and nonprofits. Sites offer meaningful projects, support, a workspace, tools, and supplies.

"With our partners, ECO AmeriCorps members help strengthen local communities and foster environmental stewardship," said ECO AmeriCorps Program Supervisor Dustin

Bowman. "Being a member allows you to build your network, confidence, and skills on projects you care about. Our alumni truly leave a lasting, collective, and positive impact on Vermont's communities and environment."

Members receive a total living stipend of \$26,000. Upon successful completion of 1,700 hours, members are eligible for a Segal AmeriCorps Education Award of \$7,395. Other benefits include health insurance, child care assistance, training, support, peer network, and student loan forbearance during the term of service.

ECO AmeriCorps is funded in part through an AmeriCorps state grant provided by SerVermont from the Corporation for National and Community Service. To learn more and apply, contact Bowman at Dustin.Bowman@Vermont.gov with any questions.

Rockingham election

FROM SECTION FRONT

Bonnie North, who is giving up her three-year seat on the board, was elected to the other one-year seat with 313 votes.

Wright got 148 votes, and candidates Jamey Berrick and Stanley Talstra got 180 and 67 votes, respectively.

The open three-year Selectboard seat was won by Rick Cowan, who ran unopposed and got 576 votes. Cowan was voted unanimously by the board to serve as Chair, replacing long-time chair Peter Golec.

Golec has said that this will be his last year on the Selectboard after serving over 15 years, many of those as Chair.

"I think the Town Meeting and the election did indicate the direction that most community members want to go," Dunbar said. "While no one wants taxes to increase without reason, many understand that if our community is not growing, not investing in its future, it's going to begin a decline that is very difficult to get out of, and certainly without significant costs in the long run."

Dunbar added that he felt the election results showed that the voters also want people in elected positions who are offering solutions and not simply criticizing others for the state of affairs.

"There are a lot of challenges ahead for our Selectboard and the school boards," Dunbar said. Having people on the boards who can work together toward solutions with civility and concern for all those affected, he said, seemed to be important for voters.

"We should not be encouraging voters to make decisions based on fears of what could happen," he said, but instead "based on what we as elected officials will do to provide solutions when and if challenges are faced."

He commented on the amazing sense of pride he sees in the community and noted that the future of Rockingham is looking brighter on many fronts. "I think that voters are sending a signal that they want to capture that energy and ensure it continues in coming years."

Paul Obuchowski, who served on the Union High School board for 30 years before stepping down 12 years ago, was voted back as a school director of UHS District #27, defeating incumbent Jason Terry with 546 votes to his 149.

Obuchowski was also elected as town moderator with 677 votes, and he was also elected school moderator.

all the people."

He added that he felt, during the last budget process, "I'm not sure that those board members really listened to the community," a sentiment he interprets as the reason previous board members were defeated by such a wide margin.

He noted that in all his years on the board, the only time he'd presented a budget that was defeated was when he felt the board had not listened to what the community wanted. That budget had eliminated a driver's ed position, and voters rejected the budget until the position was added back in.

"It's always about the kids and the community," Obuchowski said. "The kids are the most important. Educate every kid at a cost the taxpayers can afford."

In the race for one three-year seat as director of the Rockingham School District, Rick Holloway defeated incumbent Priscilla Clough Lambert, 460 to 192.

Two new members were elected to one-year seats as school directors of Union High School District #27, Christopher Hodsden, Sr., with 411 votes, and Kim Keefe, with 310. Also running were Michael Stack, with 196 votes; Virginia Driscoll, with 184; Jason Terry, with 134; and Deborah Wright, with 77.

While new to the board, both new members are well known in the school system. Hodsden was principal of BFUHS for 16 years before taking a new position, and Keefe had been a front office worker at the high school.

In other results, Thomas (Tad) Dedrick was elected as a town lister with 550 votes.

Elected as trustees of the Rockingham Free Public Library were Martha Rowley, with 543 votes, and Michael Sola, with 438.

The sole two-year seat on the Rockingham School District board was won by unopposed Jim McAulliffe with 499 votes.

Article 2, proposing a \$10.5 million Rockingham school budget, passed 412 to 232.

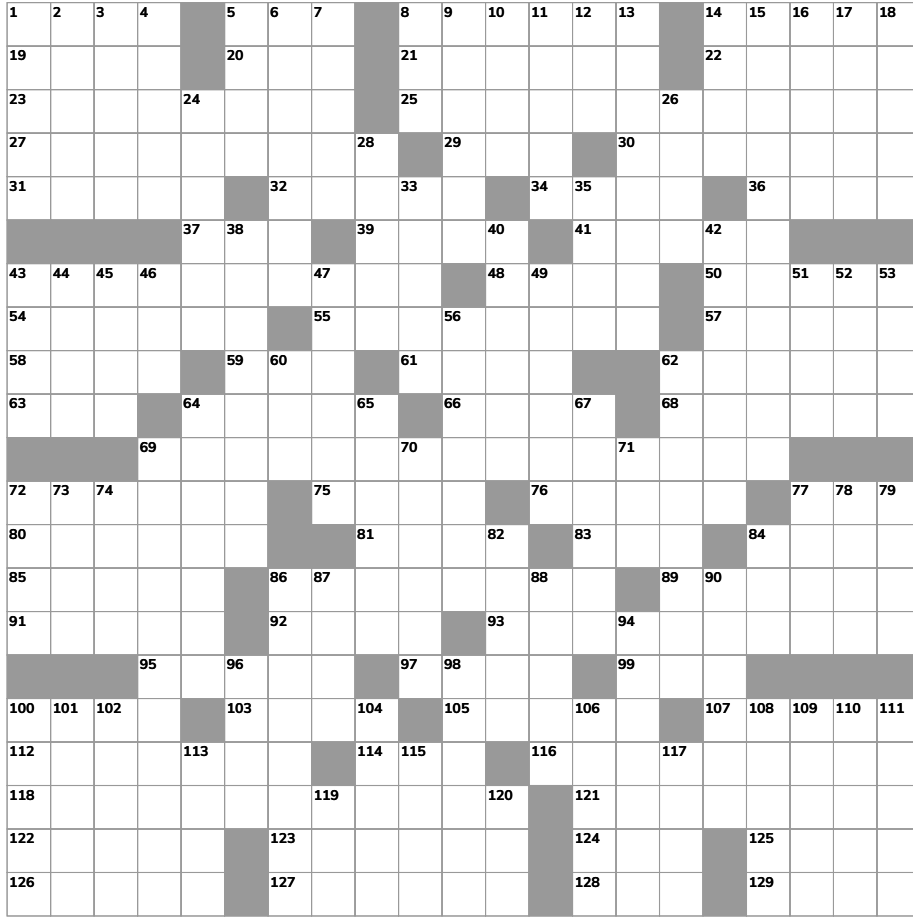
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"Left Behind"

Across

- Shaker crystals
- Closest pal, for short
- Celtics broadcaster Maxwell
- "No bid"
- Lab culture
- Part of REO
- Skin care brand
- Dunkin' order
- Succotash bit
- Pale shade of ketchup?
- The way OPEC would do it?
- Not be serious
- Talking-to
- Frequency unit
- Familiar literary device
- Pair for Mikaela Shiffrin
- Tailless primates
- "__ Maria"
- Wind blast
- Luggage attachment
- Yearly record of Father Christmas?
- Mil. branch with an academy in New London
- "I love you" in Spanish
- Suitable for regifting, perhaps
- Like the Writers Guild of America, for much of 2023
- Infamous Ford flop
- Teeny
- Pops
- Geologic divisions
- Accommodated
- No later than, briefly
- Earlier
- Tiny criticisms
- Things that happen
- What a mushroom lover always has?
- Christmas songs
- Ice sheet
- Moving van company
- Coxa, anatomically speaking
- Negative battery terminals
- Pulmonary organ
- Taylor Swift album with "All Too Well"
- Facility
- "__ Talking" (2022 Best Picture nominee)
- Prepare to cold-reboot
- "No argument here"
- Elitist sort
- __ the King Prawn (Muppet)
- Realistic animal figurine?
- Westernmost mainland African city
- Bit of whiskey
- Big Apple daily: Abbr.
- Twosome
- Cold War weapon: Abbr.
- Plant swelling
- Inflatable boats
- A, for one
- Tolkien tree creature
- Prepare to have soup instead of salad at the buffet?
- Ride a pinniped?
- Totally safe
- __ up (hid for a while)
- "__ Fables"
- Useful connections
- "A Death in the Family" author James
- Burly and beefy
- Poured or drizzled
- Get on in years
- Hit on the head



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Down

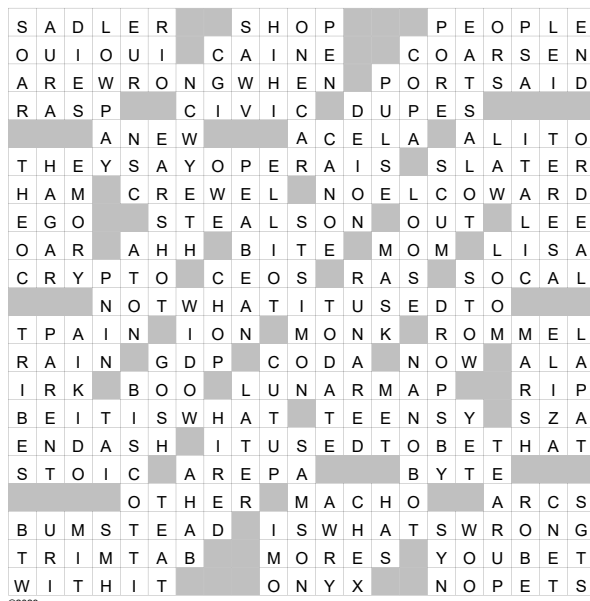
- Liverpool soccer star Mohamed
- Nimble
- Rapper Kendrick
- Parcel of land
- Sam Adams offering
- Make level
- Less coarse
- Lion or lynx
- Calls to mind
- "Sorry Not Sorry" singer Lovato
- Goes over the Globe?
- QB's mistake
- President who was governor of Massachusetts
- Apple desktop
- Face-off over stamps?
- Misbehave
- Sexologist Hite
- __ pitch
- Turkish market
- Annoying one
- Airport at the Airport MBTA stop
- Throb
- Get a leg up?
- Luther nicknamed the "Velvet Voice"
- Submit
- Had dinner at a friend's
- Hearts or clubs
- Opposed to
- League whose 2023 championship was won by Gotham FC
- Many a stocking stuffer
- Fall asleep
- Nun
- Org.
- Fitting
- Part of REO
- Very much
- Archer's asset
- Study for Gregor Mendel
- Cornmeal dish
- Arrive in a car
- Ancient Greek city that's

- now Izmir, Turkey
- Nonsense spouted at a roping contest?
- Defeated handily
- Dedicated lines?
- Crow's calls
- Auth. unknown
- NFL broadcaster Tony
- Challenging
- "Hmm, OK?"
- Banana throwaway
- Rot
- Freudian psyche component
- Low key?
- Flavoring plant
- "Yes, I already know them"
- Option from South Station
- Windy, in a way

- Waste, as time
- Change the wrapping on, as a trainer might
- Hiking trails
- Direction indicator
- Author Calvino
- 2023 Ballon d'Or winner Lionel
- Journalist Hinojosa who founded Futuro Media
- Jennifer Saunders Britcom, for short
- Do without
- Sixth-grader, typically
- Aerodynamic
- Give up
- Element #10
- To be, in Latin
- Vote in favor
- Acid that's "dropped"

Last issue's solution

"It Ain't Over Till The Fat Lady Sings"



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VHIP financing

FROM SECTION FRONT

Brattleboro, to identify suitable tenants exiting homelessness. Applicants who create accessory dwelling units — think “grandmother apartments” — on an owner-occupied property are exempt from this requirement.

Since 2022, VHIP has funded the creation of more than 500 housing units statewide, many for people experiencing homelessness.

Windham & Windsor Housing Trust (WWHT), which administers the VHIP program for Windham and Windsor counties, has completed more projects than organizations in any other region in the state, according to WWHT Executive Director Elizabeth Bridgewater. Since 2022, WWHT has awarded or approved more than \$3.3 million in VHIP grants for Windham County projects, which will result in 75 new apartments.

The Commons spoke to three housing developers whose local VHIP-funded projects are in various stages of completion. While they all praised the program for its intent to lift Vermonters out of homelessness, they agreed that navigating the grant program, in addition to dealing with the complexities of housing development, is a challenge.

‘This would be completely crazy for a first-timer to take on’

A single mom of two, Megan Talbot lives in Chittenden County, where she is a teacher at Colchester Middle School. Calling her investment properties her “golden egg,” her goal is to retire from teaching in a year or two and work full-time in real estate development.

Talbot is using VHIP grant funds, along with loans, tax credits, and personal funds, to renovate 33 Oak St. When she bought the building in June 2023, it was “in a full state of disrepair,” Talbot said, with drugs reportedly being sold out of one of the apartments. After spending much of the past year evicting tenants, Talbot hopes to break ground on May 1.

Talbot estimates the total project cost at \$1.1 million. Half of the \$510,000 in VHIP grants will be used to rehab eight existing apartments in the house. Additional funds will be used to build five more units in the building.

“I want to keep the bones of the building because it’s quite beautiful, like a lot of places in town,” Talbot said.

Talbot said the skills she gained in her first three years of investing in real estate prepped her to tackle the Oak Street project, which is the largest “gut renovation” she’s done.

“I don’t know that I would have been able to navigate all the checks and balances along the way that it’s taken to get to this point, if I didn’t have the professional drive to do this, if I was just Megan Talbot, mom, trying to do my own property,” she said.

She believes the VHIP program could be improved if the state funded a consultant to assist program participants who aren’t experienced in real estate development.

“I definitely would say that it would be completely crazy for a first-timer to take on,” Talbot said.

Talbot had what she calls a “traditional money upbringing”: raised to go to college, get a good job, and work really hard to save money until retirement. But she saw a different future for herself, one that could pair her interest in social justice with a stable income.

“Part of my vision for investing, besides making money,” Talbot said, “is to provide clean, safe, affordable housing for people because the cost of living in Vermont is outrageous right now.”

Talbot found the Oak Street property by networking with local real estate investors. Since she doesn’t live locally, she hired Bob Lyons of Southern Vermont Property Management to manage the property.

Talbot will work with Groundworks Collaborative to choose tenants from a list of people experiencing homelessness. “It’s going to be a learning experience for me,” Talbot said, “but anytime we can provide opportunity for folks who need it, it’s just going to build a stronger community.”

When it comes to choosing tenants, Talbot said, “I’m less concerned about things like credit scores, and more concerned about finding somebody who is going to take care of the property, has stable work, or the ability to provide some income to pay for it.”

“Just a good, honest, hard-working person who needs a place to live,” she added. “I’m looking for quality of character almost more than what’s in their bank account.”

Talbot believes small-scale, local development is one part of the multifaceted approach to creating the housing that is needed in the state.

“My opinion — probably because I’m a developer — is to maximize use of the existing infrastructure before breaking ground on new builds. We have a ton of old, aging housing stock. If I had enough help with funding I could turn some of the big old properties in town into smaller, affordable places to live. Nobody needs a 7,000 square foot house anymore.”

‘I’m learning on the fly here’

Chris Brown, owner of Cozy VT Properties in Wilmington, is using a \$250,000 VHIP grant to create five apartments in a renovated paint store downtown. The building will also house a small retail space and a commercial space for his business.

Noting the paperwork involved in the project — four stacks of paper on his office floor — Brown said, “I sure as hell hope it’s worth it.”

But Brown said he couldn’t have done the project without the VHIP grant.

The total project cost is estimated to be \$600,000, excluding the purchase of the property. State tax credits are being used to restore the historic facade of the building, install new windows, and bring the building’s electrical and plumbing systems up to code.

Brown’s rents are in line with HUD’s fair market prices. He charges \$1,076 for his studio apartments, \$1,200 for the one-bedroom, and \$1,700 for the three-bedroom, including utilities.

“Finding applicants who best fit the project is the biggest hurdle,” Brown said. “Just because there’s a bunch of people that need housing doesn’t mean they’re a good fit.”

Brown worked closely with Groundworks staff to identify his first two tenants, who are local to Wilmington.

“A lot of these folks who are coming through Coordinated Entry and in need of a home may or may not have a job, may or may not have the means to pay for rent,” Brown said. “As generous as I like to be, ultimately the building costs money to operate.”

Brown was able to secure project-based Section 8 housing vouchers, which cover most of the rental costs; tenants’ payments are capped at 30 percent of their income.

Brown said that it wasn’t his intent to build housing for people experiencing homelessness. “I needed a building to run my business out of,” he said.

“But as my wife and I went through this project, we were kind of like, ‘This is good. This is gonna help people. This is good all the way around.’”

Brown is a general contractor who also operates short-term rentals and a commercial property. Originally from Dover, he attended Wilmington High School and spent 20 years as a painter and contractor.

While Brown advises those interested in the VHIP program to “do their research early,” he acknowledges that the only real way to get a good understanding of the program is to go through it. “I’m learning on the fly here,” he said.

He’s hopeful that in another month or two, once all of his units are occupied, things will smooth out.

“And then I might say, ‘Wow! That was a lot of work but worth it. I was able to fill a void in the community by taking an old, run-down building and creating two retail spaces and providing housing to five folks who needed it.’”

‘I can make a small apartment for somebody’

With a \$50,000 VHIP grant and a home equity line of credit, Joann Erenhouse was able to create a one-bedroom apartment in the shed attached to the back of her 223-year-old Chester house.

Erenhouse is the community relations director for Senior Solutions, a nonprofit that provides services and support to senior citizens in southeast Vermont. Through her work, she saw that many older Vermonters were being displaced from their housing during the pandemic when the houses and apartments they were living in were bought by out-of-towners who didn’t want tenants.

“My concern was: if you’re 85 years old, and you’re put on a five-year waiting list for an apartment, what are the chances that you’re going to end up in a caser before you get an apartment?” Erenhouse said.

Erenhouse saw the VHIP grant



ELLEN PRATT/THE COMMONS

This apartment house at 33 Oak St. in Brattleboro is in the process of being renovated with funds through the Vermont Housing Improvement Program. When finished, there will be a total of 13 new units available for rent.

This blueprint prepared by Greenberg Associates Architects of Putney shows what the apartment house at 33 Oak St. in Brattleboro will look like after completion of a renovation project.



as a way to create much-needed senior housing. “I said to myself, ‘I have a big old house, I have plenty of bedrooms for myself and I don’t need to use the shed,’” she said. “I can’t help everybody, but I can make a small apartment for somebody.”

Her tenant, an 85-year-old woman who had been evicted from the state’s motel housing program, moved into the small apartment in September. A Section 8 voucher pays for the majority of the rent and the tenant pays the remainder.

Erenhouse is a lawyer with some experience in commercial development. She says she’s not afraid of construction and has renovated houses in the past, so she understands the process. These skills served her well as the project progressed.

“You really have to be a good project manager,” she said. “Many people living in old houses can barely figure out their own buildings — utilities and everything — let alone handle a construction project.”

Housing development involves many steps, including securing a building permit, getting a fire

inspection, and identifying and working with contractors. She believes the VHIP process could be improved with a guide “in plain, simple English, not contract language” outlining the steps.

“I’m glad that I did it,” Erenhouse says of her project. “It provided a really quiet, safe, clean place for an older person to be housed in an affordable manner.”

Strong Demand for VHIP 2.0

The latest iteration of the program — VHIP 2.0 — introduces a 10-year forgivable loan alongside the existing 5-year grants. This new option requires landlords to rent units at HUD’s fair market rates without the need for referrals from coordinated entry organizations.

Bridgewater of WWHT says VHIP 2.0 increases flexibility and options. It addresses concerns expressed by some program applicants about accepting tenants who are the hardest to serve — primarily people exiting homelessness who need supportive services focused on housing retention. Bridgewater says these services


are hard to access in more rural towns due to the lack of transportation options.

Between VHIP’s five- and ten-year options, housing can be created both for those in need of intensive services and for those who don’t need these services. Either way, says Bridgewater, private property owners can help to address the structural crisis of

not enough units, which results in a virtual musical chairs situation where the most vulnerable are left standing with no housing options.

WWHT will start accepting applications for VHIP 2.0 funding on April 15. The organization reports strong demand for grants, with 169 people inquiring about the next round of funding.

Be Sure To Check Our Full Program Schedule @brattleborotv.org



April 8-14
CHANNEL 1078

LOCAL PROGRAM HIGHLIGHTS

CHANNEL 1079

PLEASE NOTE NEW CHANNEL NUMBERS!

<p>Here We Are - Anna Patton, Musician: Mon 8p, Tues 3:15p, Wed 12:30p, Thurs 9:15p, Fri 10:15a, Sat 1:55p, Sun 5:15p</p>	<p>West River Education District Board Mtg. 4/8/24: Wed 6p, Thurs 8:30a, Fri 12p</p>
<p>The World Fusion Show - Ep 175 - The World Fusion Show Sampler #2: Mon 9p, Tues 4:30p, Wed 9a, Thurs 5p, Fri 7a, Sat 6p, Sun 10a</p>	<p>Jamaica Selectboard Mtg. 4/8/24: Wed 8:30p, Thurs 6a, Fri 2:30p</p>
<p>Windham World Affairs Council - Migration from the North Triangle: They Are Here Because We Were There: Wed 4:30p, Thurs 9a, Fri 12:30p, Sat 8p, Sun 12:30p</p>	<p>Townshend Selectboard Mtg. 4/9/24: Thurs 6p, Fri 8a, Sat 12p</p>
<p>Town of Brattleboro - Meet The BPD Officer Deanna Lopez: Mon 6:55p, Wed 6:55p, Fri 1:55p & 6:55p, Sun 5:55p</p>	<p>Windham Southeast School District Board Mtg. 4/9/24: Thurs 8:30p, Fri 5:30a, Sat 2:30p</p>
<p>Perspectives on Trauma - Part 2: Alice Buchanan: Mon 2:30p, Tues 9a, Wed 11a, Thurs 4:30p, Fri 9:30p, Sat 5:30p, Sun 9:30a</p>	<p>Guilford Selectboard Mtg. 4/10/24: Fri 6p, Sat 8:30a, Sun 12p</p>
<p>Channel 1078 News - Sam's Outdoor Outfitters Closing Tour 1/29/24: Mon 2p, Tues 6a, Wed 11:30a & 9:15p, Thurs 4p, Fri 5:30p, Sat 9a, Sun 6p</p>	<p>Windham Southeast Supervisory Union Board Mtg. 4/10/24: Fri 8:30p, Sat 6a, Sun 2:30p</p>
<p>Juno Orchestra - Challenge - Movement 3 from Glimpses of Azure: Tues 11:45a & 3:45p, Wed 5:45p, Thurs 10:20a, Fri 10:50a, Sat 12:20p & 9:20p, Sun 1:50p</p>	<p>Brattleboro Representative Town Meeting 2024: Mon 11:45a, Tues 6p, Wed 6a</p>
<p>Sunflower Court - @Sunflower's Ct Promo: Mon 6:30p, Wed 9:10p, Thurs 6:55p, Fri 10:10a, Sun 7:55a</p>	<p>Newfane Selectboard Mtg. 4/1/24: Mon 6:15p, Fri 5p, Sat 11a</p>
<p>BCTV Open Studio - Moover Microtransit Program 3/27/24: Tues 8p, Wed 3:30p, Thurs 5:30p, Fri 7:30a, Sat 6:30p, Sun 10:30a</p>	<p>Brattleboro Planning Commission Mtg. 4/1/24: Tues 10a</p>
<p>Energy Week with George Harvey & Tom Finnell: Mon 9a, Tues 5p, Thurs 11a, Sat 7p</p>	<p>River Valleys Unified School District Board Mtg. 4/1/24: Thurs 4:30p</p>
<p>Vermontitude - Weekly Episode: Tue 11:30a & 6:30p, Wed 6a, Thu 1p, Sat 12p, Sun 5p</p>	<p>Vernon Selectboard Mtg. 4/2/24: Tues 11:30a</p>
<p>News Block: Reformer News Break: Mon-Fri 12p & 6p BUHS-TV News: Mon-Fri 12:15p & 6:35p</p>	<p>Brattleboro Selectboard Mtg. 4/2/24: Tues 6a, Sat 8p</p>
<p>St. Michael's Episcopal Church - Weekly Service: Wed 2p, Sat 7:30a, Sun 11a</p>	<p>Dummerston Selectboard Mtg. 4/3/24: Tues 3:30p</p>
<p>Trinity Lutheran Church - Weekly Service: Wed 10a, Thurs 7a, Sun 3p</p>	<p>Putney Selectboard Mtg. 4/3/24: Wed 2:15p</p>
<p>Guilford Community Church - Weekly Service: Wed 6:30a, Fri 8p, Sun 8a</p>	<p>Town Matters - Weekly Episode: Mon 6p, Wed 4:45p, Thurs 11a, Fri 11:30a, Sat 5p</p>
<p>St. Michael's Catholic Church Mass: Tue 6:45a & 2p, Thurs 8p, Sat 4p (LIVE)</p>	<p>The David Pakman Show: Mon 8a, Tue 9a, Wed 5p, Fri 10:30a, Sun 5p</p>


Note: Schedule subject to change.

View full schedule and watch online at **brattleborotv.org**

BCTV's Program Highlights are sponsored by **The Commons**. BCTV's municipal meeting coverage helps **Commons** reporters stay in touch. Read about it in the Town & Village section at www.commonnews.org.

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Vermont Independent Media



Voices Live: Conversation on Homelessness

Wednesday, April 24

6pm-8pm

Brooks Memorial Library

224 Main St, Brattleboro

The public is welcome to join us in person, or watch live on BCTV's YouTube Channel and Facebook Page.

Panelists:

Michael Pieciak, Vermont State Treasurer

Anne N. Sosin, lecturer and researcher at Dartmouth College

Elizabeth Bridgewater, Executive Director, Windham Windsor Housing Trust

Josh Davis, Executive Director, SEVCA

Libby Bennett, Executive Director, Groundworks Collaborative.

Moderated by Joyce Marcel



ARI RESS/SPECIAL TO THE COMMONS



ARI RESS/SPECIAL TO THE COMMONS

Ari Ress, of Brattleboro, captured the total eclipse from Plainfield.

Four children — Jacob, Alice, Grace, and Sage — watch the eclipse from Dummerston.

PATH *of* TOTALITY

Vermonters pause for rare celestial synchronicity — a front-row seat to a solar eclipse on April 8



Ron Bos-Lun of Westminster watches as the light returns. Bos-Lun joined hundreds of people in Montpelier on the lawn of the Vermont State House (including his wife, Rep. Michelle Bos-Lun).

MICHELLE BOS-LUN/SPECIAL TO THE COMMONS



ZARA MINA BODE/SPECIAL TO THE COMMONS

“My dearest friend’s father is buried on a hilltop in Glover, and so we spent the day playing hooky and basking in the light,” writes Zara Bode. “It’s true what they say: there’s nothing like it. Road tripping to totality was worth every second of slog up and down 91.”

THERE IS something really cool and unifying about being out and about and having everyone wearing silly paper glasses and staring at the sky. Suddenly, we’re all doing the same thing for the same reason ... and then everyone goes back to their day.

—Allyson Wendt, Brattleboro



ROO GRUBIS/SPECIAL TO THE COMMONS

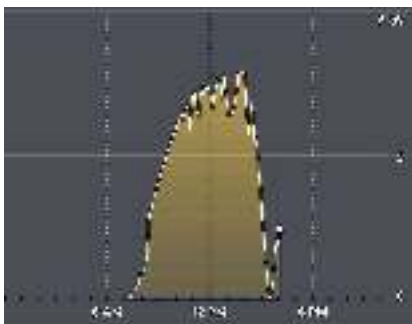
Rex enjoyed the eclipse from Guilford.

A family watches with wonder from Brattleboro.



RACHAEL TRILL/SPECIAL TO THE COMMONS

“I thought it was cool to see the drop in our solar power as the eclipse began,” says Bill Lindsay of West Brattleboro.



BILL LINDSAY/SPECIAL TO THE COMMONS



At Elliot Street Park in Brattleboro, “There was a good-sized crowd of families and a lot of snacks, including several eclipse cakes!” writes parent Kate Audlin. “We set up a shadow projector. We had a great time.”

KATE AUDLIN/SPECIAL TO THE COMMONS



GEORGE CARVILL/SPECIAL TO THE COMMONS

George Carvill of Brattleboro returned from northern Vermont amid the throngs, who put a strain on goods and services, including restaurants, including one in St. Johnsbury that “persevered until they ran out of food and posted the sign you can see here.” He says he learned another lesson: “In a mass traffic mess, if Google says a different route will save you time and a whole bunch of you in the traffic jam take the Google suggestion, it turns out to cost you more time than it was supposed to save.”



MYLES DANAHER/SPECIAL TO THE COMMONS

Out-of-state visitors — estimates ranged from 160,000 to 200,000 of them — came to Vermont to see the eclipse, and a good number of them decided to turn around and go home en masse after it ended. “Never in my lifetime,” Myles Danaher of Brattleboro posted on Facebook during his return trip from northern Vermont. “I-91 south the length of Vermont [was] bumper to bumper. Typical 2.5 hour drive was six hours.”

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AROUND THE TOWNS

Town requires Excavation and Trench Permit before digging

BRATTLEBORO — Beginning this construction season, anyone performing excavation work in the town of Brattleboro right-of-way or on systems involving town infrastructure must have an Excavation and Trench Permit.

The permit will allow the Public Works Department to have greater communication with homeowners and contractors about town infrastructure and important steps for a safe workplace prior to beginning excavation. It will also ensure that at the end of the project that the ground surface covers (pavement, concrete, plantings) are left in proper condition.

The permit is free of charge and applications can be found at tinyurl.com/bder7bk8, on the Public Works website, at the Brattleboro Planning Office, and at Public Works. For further information, contact Public Works at 802-254-4255.

Coin, postcard, and sports card show on April 13

BRATTLEBORO — The Tri-Town Coin, Postcard and Sports Card Collector's Club will host a couple of guest dealers from New Hampshire and Massachusetts

during its show and collector meetings on Saturday, April 13, at the Holiday Inn Express on Chickering Drive. Area collectors of all ages are invited.

The event, which will offer door prizes, begins at 8 a.m. with a club business meeting during the show's startup session. After a family fun day of buying and selling collectibles, dealers will join the Tri Town Numismatic Society at 2:30 p.m. for its monthly meeting.

There is no admission charge and anyone looking to sell or trade their collectible items may set up a card table by contacting show chairman Joe Fuller at 802-379-2353, or Pepsijoseph@yahoo.com.

Vernon Historians host program about Vern-Mont Farm

VERNON — The Vernon Historians invite the public to a program at the Governor Hunt House Community Center about Vern-Mont Farm, which has been owned and operated by the Dunklee family for five generations.

On Sunday, April 14, at 2:30 p.m., Jeff Dunklee will share stories, photographs, and the history of this dairy farm and celebrate the contributions to the town by his and other farm families. The program will immediately follow a brief business meeting of the Vernon Historians membership at 2 p.m. It is free, all are welcome,

and refreshments will be served.

The Governor Hunt House Community Center, at 322 Governor Hunt Road in Vernon, is accessed off Vermont Yankee Drive. Parking is available at the community center and across the street at the Vernon Elementary School.

Mending bee at Putney Library

PUTNEY — The Mending Bee at Putney Public Library, 55 Main St., is back for April. Those with a pile of nice wool socks with holes, favorite jeans that would be perfect if not for a rip in the knee, or sweaters with moth holes, are invited to bring their ailing fabric items to the library on Sunday, April 14, from 1 to 4 p.m., to work on them in the company of others.

Advice and support are always available, but all participants do their own mending. Sewing machines and darning tools are available to use during the Bee. This program is free.

'War Tax' resisters hold information event

BRATTLEBORO — The U.S. military budget for one year exceeds the combined yearly military budgets of the next 11 largest-spending nations. According to Taxes for Peace, New England, "this is paid for by our federal income tax."

To share what can be done about paying (or not paying) for war, this advocacy group will host its annual war tax resistance information table Monday, April 15 (Tax Day), from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. outside the Brattleboro Food Co-op, 2 Main St. For more information, visit bit.ly/760-tax or contact Daniel Sicken at 802-428-3690.

Community shredding event in Newfane

NEWFANE — On Saturday, April 20, from 9 a.m. to noon, people can securely dispose of their old documents and support the Townshend and Newfane libraries.

A SecurShred truck will be parked on Jail Street in Newfane for this on-site shredding event. There is no need to remove staples or paper clips, and items are shredded as participants wait. The Windham Solid Waste Management District will also be there to discuss composting and have a truck to take computer

peripherals for recycling.

A \$10 per box donation is suggested, with proceeds split between the Moore Free Library and the Townshend Public Library.

Free produce distribution in Putney

PUTNEY — The Vermont Foodbank and the Putney Foodshelf co-sponsor a monthly food drop of free produce and some nonperishables on the fourth Thursday of every month, from 9 to 9:45 a.m., on Alice Holway drive (in front of Putney Meadows, the white building across from the Putney Co-op and the Putney Fire Station).

All are welcome. This is a drive-up service; bags provided. The next monthly food drop is Thursday, April 25, 9 to 9:45 a.m.

Crop Cash benefits at farmers markets will restart in May

RICHMOND — With the summer farmers market season starting soon, the Northeast Organic Farming Association of Vermont (NOFA-VT) is once again helping Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) customers to multiply their benefits with Crop Cash, beginning in May.

What is Crop Cash? For every dollar of 3SquaresVermont/SNAP benefits spent at a participating farmers market, eligible participants can receive a dollar of Crop Cash (up to \$10) to spend on fruits, vegetables, herbs, culinary seeds, and plant starts. Anyone who receives 3SquaresVT/SNAP benefits, as well as folks who still have P-EBT benefits, is automatically eligible to get Crop Cash at a farmers market — there is no additional application for this program.

Last year, NOFA-VT piloted an expansion called Crop Cash Plus, which allowed SNAP customers to get extra coupons to spend on any SNAP-eligible food (like bread, eggs, meat, dairy, and grains).

According to NOFA-VT, this program was incredibly popular and well-utilized in 2023, but no funding was provided to continue the program in 2024, and they are currently lobbying state lawmakers for a budget allocation to continue Crop Cash Plus later in 2024 or 2025.

For more information about the Crop Cash program, visit bit.ly/760-cropcash.



Art provided by Philip McCulloch-Downs

Compassion is to see the suffering of others and take action to stop it.

What do you feel as you take in this image?

Where is this piglet and how did they get there?

This is an artistic rendering of a photo from a farm of a real piglet. Are you called to take action for this piglet and others like them?

Scan to learn more!



This ad by Compassionate Brattleboro is funded by The Pollination Project. Compassionate Brattleboro's mission is to raise awareness about the meaning of compassion in our lives. Visit compassionatebrattleboro.org

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CAQ-SPORTS MEDICINE

Groundworks FROM SECTION FRONT

On the first anniversary of the death, the \$3.3 million facility is open, but the separate 30-bed Morningside House remains closed as new leadership works on a blueprint for the future.

"We want to be the best support we can, but we've learned we cannot be all things to all people," said Bennett, who was recently promoted to the post of executive director. "The needs have grown a lot more complex."

Groundworks' challenge, she knows, mirrors that of similar organizations statewide.

Back in 2011, when Bennett was a graduate student, her volunteer work at Brattleboro's former shelter in the First Baptist Church centered on helping people who slept on the floor there. At the time, the biggest struggle was the fact the religious congregation was shrinking to the point it had to sell the building in 2019.

More need than ever

Much has changed since Bennett joined the agency in 2012. She helped with a merger that placed all of the area's food and housing programs under the Groundworks umbrella in 2015 and celebrated the opening of its \$3.3 million facility with 34 overnight beds and daytime restrooms, showers, washers, dryers and storage lockers in 2021.

Just before Covid, some 98 people were reported to be without housing in the Brattleboro area, according to a 2019 count. After the arrival of the pandemic, that number tripled to 329 in the most recent tally.

"Once, we had a lot of people who struggled with alcohol," Bennett said. "Now, we have a lot of people who struggle with other substance use disorders."

Groundworks has also encountered more clients with mental health issues. The state is hospitalizing the resident charged with last year's Morningside House killing until at least August after ruling the accused to be incompetent to stand trial, according to court records.

Following last year's death, Groundworks enlisted other providers to temporarily oversee all of its services while the agency's 45 employees grieved and

regrouped.

"We have learned how to ask for help," Bennett said. "We don't have the capacity to do it all."

Upon returning to operation, the agency then strengthened its rules against threatening behavior.

"We need to consider our own boundaries around increasing safety and reducing risks," Bennett said. "We all understand we're upholding these out of respect for each other."

'There are not enough places for people'

Groundworks is facing other issues, starting with inflation. Its food shelf rescues an estimated \$500,000 of expiring supermarket staples every year. But demand has skyrocketed by up to 100 new households a month, its records show.

The lack of affordable housing is an even larger problem. A recent municipally sponsored Housing Action Plan found an immediate need for more than 500 units in town.

"The perfect metaphor for this is a game of musical chairs," Bennett said. "There are not enough places for people."

Groundworks is talking with neighbors about its hopes to raze and replace Morningside House, although the agency has yet to announce specific plans.

"We're waiting on some major funding decisions," Bennett said, "but are meticulously designing a brand-new program to bring back beds and services."

The executive director was one of 150 people who attended a recent Brattleboro screening of Vermont filmmaker Bess O'Brien's new documentary *Just Getting By*.

Bennett nodded knowingly during its depiction of social workers fighting poverty on the frontlines — all while the state and federal government cuts pandemic-era funding.



Art of students in the Windham Central Supervisory Union will be exhibited at Crowell Gallery at Moore Free Library in Newfane through April.



Student art *for* all the senses

At Crowell Gallery, students from the region exhibit art projects inspired by the story of a deaf woman who experiences music through vibrations

By Alyssa Grosso
The Commons

NEW FANE — The Crowell Art Gallery at Moore Free Library will present an annual exhibition of art by K-5 students from NewBrook, Townsend, Jamaica School, Dover, Wardsboro, and Marlboro schools.

The free exhibit will run until Monday, April 29.

The art teachers involved are Suzanne Paugh, from NewBrook, Townsend, and Jamaica schools; Katy Hughes, from Dover and Warsboro schools; and Jamie Schilling, from Marlboro School. Librarian Fiona Chevalier

reads them a book — this year's choice is *Listen* by Shannon Stocker — and they analyze what is happening throughout the story.

"It takes all of us," she says. *Listen* is about the percussionist Evelyn Glennie, who is deaf and experiences music through vibrations.

Paugh says you can start to pick out a lot of interesting themes, which can easily inspire deeper thinking for the kids involved.

The exhibit consists of artwork inspired by the book teachers have chosen.

"We meet nearly every month, or every other month, to work on collaboration projects," Paugh explains.

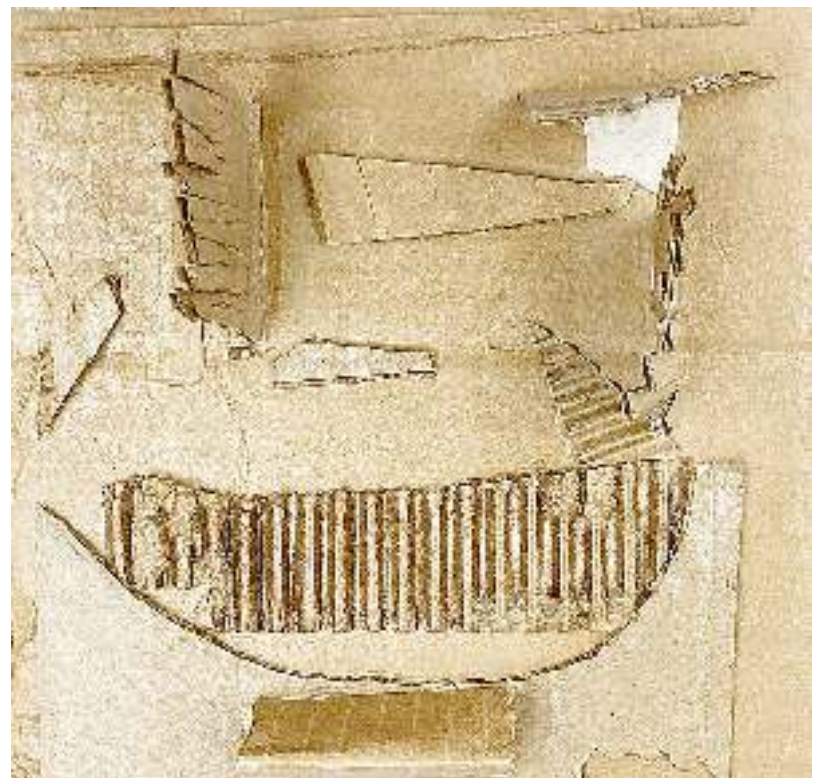
After the book is chosen, teachers present it to the students and create projects around it, which Paugh says are "usually fairly open-ended." For this project, they focused on Glennie.

Students and teachers talk about how you can feel music, and create abstract pieces of artwork around that theme using various materials. "They're exploring materials and also thinking of the connections between what they hear and what they create," Paugh says.

Involving artists of different ages

Paugh discusses the students' different contributions to this

■ SEE STUDENT ART, B4



A student touch board, made of cardboard.

COURTESY OF SUZANNE PAUGH



COURTESY PHOTO

Mary Lacy, left, and Corrine Yonce will be leading the installation of a mosaic at Pliny Park in Brattleboro.

Mosaic Project takes steps toward fruition

Organizers envision a smashing success but seek donations to unlock state funding for mural at Pliny Park in Brattleboro

By Annie Landenberger
The Commons

BRATTLEBORO—With the launch of an online fundraising campaign and two main events — a Smash Party this Saturday and a Co-creation Celebration on Saturday, April 20 — an initiative to create a mosaic mural on the vacant wall of a downtown park is becoming a reality. The Pliny Park Mosaic Project

began as the brainchild of Greg Lesch, the executive director of the Brattleboro Area Chamber of Commerce, and Jamie Mohr, the executive director of Epsilon Spires, a not-for-profit organization housed at the former First Baptist Church on Main Street dedicated to "social impact through art and science."

Leaders for the park project, at the corner of High and Main streets, invite the community to partake, according to a news

release, in "transforming the blank concrete wall [...] with beautiful original art that sparks local pride, supports cultural tourism in our region, and inspires a sense of community co-ownership of our public spaces."

With community input, the project organizers believe they "can revitalize this neglected area of downtown Brattleboro with a vibrant collaborative artwork celebrating our exceptional

■ SEE MOSIAC PROJECT, B4

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Literary Cocktail Hour looks at 'Eve and Human Evolution' with Cat Bohannon

BRATTLEBORO—Author Cat Bohannon will talk about how the female body drove 200 million years of human evolution at this month's free online Literary Cocktail Hour, a virtual event presented by the Brattleboro Literary Festival, on Friday, April 12, at 5 p.m.

Bohannon's new book, *Eve: How the Female Body Drove 200 Million Years of Human Evolution*, is described as "a myth-busting, eye-opening landmark account of how humans evolved, offering a paradigm shift in our thinking about what the female body is, how it came to be, and how this evolution still shapes all our lives today."

Why do women live longer than men? Why are women more likely to get Alzheimer's? Why do girls score better at every academic subject than boys until puberty, when suddenly their scores plummet? Is sexism useful for evolution? "And why, seriously why, do women have to sweat through our sheets every night when we hit menopause?" asks Bohannon.

In *Eve*, the author covers the past 200 million years to explain the specific science behind the development of the female sex "with boundless curiosity and sharp wit," say event promoters. "We need a kind of user's

manual for the female mammal," writes Bohannon. "A nonsense, hard-hitting, seriously researched (but readable) account of what we are. How female bodies evolved, how they work, what it really means to biologically be a woman. Something that would rewrite the story of womanhood. This book is that story. We have to put the female body in the picture. If we don't, it's not just feminism that's compromised."

Called a sweeping revision of human history, *Eve* is "an urgent and necessary corrective for a world that has focused primarily on the male body for far too long," say organizers. "It will completely change what you think you know about evolution and why Homo sapiens has become such a successful and dominant species."

Bohannon is a researcher and author with a doctorate from Columbia University where she studied the evolution of narrative and cognition. Her essays and poems have appeared in *Scientific American*, *Mind*, *Science Magazine*, *The Best American Nonrequired Reading*, *The Georgia Review*, *The Story Collider*, and *Poets Against the War*. She lives with her family in Seattle.

To register for this event, visit bit.ly/LitCocktail37.

Eloise & Company with Rachel Aucoin at the BMC April 12

BRATTLEBORO—Brattleboro-based band Eloise & Company is joined by Rachel Aucoin in a performance at the Brattleboro Music Center Friday, April 12, at 7 p.m.

Eloise & Co. is a shifting ensemble — often a duo and, at other times, a trio with piano or guitar. With Becky Tracy on fiddle, octave fiddle, and vocals and Rachel Bell on accordion and vocals, Eloise & Co. plays a range of music including French folk groove tunes, Celtic reels, waltzes, and Quebecois

tunes. In 2017, Tracy and Bell found themselves in a spontaneous jam session with Quebecois pianist Rachel Aucoin, and the resulting musical chemistry convinced them they had to play together again.

The trio "invites the audience into their shared musical delight with a variety of music," say organizers, ranging from old traditional tunes to their own new compositions, "all infused with the magnetism that drew them together in the first place."



COURTESY PHOTO

Eloise & Company appears at the Brattleboro Music Center on April 12.

Tickets are \$20 (\$25 at the door) and are available online on the BMC website at bmcvt.org, by calling 802-257-4523, or by emailing info@bmcvt.org.

'Artisans of Dummerston' exhibit opens Sunday, April 21

DUMMERSTON—The Dummerston Historical Society announces a new arrangement of exhibits for its openings the first and third Sunday afternoons, April 21 — June 2, 1 to 3 p.m. The site is the Society's schoolhouse located in Dummerston Center next to the Town Office.

The Society's recent Dummerston Artisans Exhibit was so popular that contributors have been invited to submit new material for a second display. Similar exhibits were mounted years ago, and organizers say they "are pleased to find once again that Dummerston is richly endowed with creative talent."

Rodrica Tilley is the first exhibitor, showing pastel landscape paintings from the opening reception, 1–2 p.m. Sunday, April 21, through June 2. Following the reception, at 2

p.m. the quarterly meeting will commence, featuring a program by veterinarian Dr. Clyde Johnson.

Johnson will share his experiences in his long medical career in Dummerston and, in anticipation of the event, Society members have put up a collection of animal photos from their archives.

Among many other scenes are images of horses drawing hay wagons, a six-team coach, a pig milking a cow, calves attended by two smiling boys, a horse with its proud owner, and a big bull led by a staff stretched in from the side of the photo to the ring in his nose. That is how he could be controlled.

Kept on for now are artifacts from the Dr. Grace Burnett collection, including a number of photographs; a genealogy; a memorial tribute by her longtime

office manager, Elsie Tier; and her medical library of some 40 volumes. Dr. Burnett (1886–1963) was the first woman physician in Brattleboro and third in the state. Her nearly 50-year career began when horseback was the best way to reach remote rural households. Among her varied medical services was the delivery of thousands of babies.

For more information, contact Muriel Taylor at 802-380-7525 or Gail Sorenson at gailsvt@gmail.com. Other viewing times are available by special appointment. Admission is free, and the building is handicapped accessible.

118 Elliot hosts Julian Gerstin Sextet on April 12

BRATTLEBORO—The Julian Gerstin Sextet will be in concert on Friday, April 12, at 8 p.m., at 118 Elliot.

The sextet formed in 2016 and has performed all over New England. "It is a powerhouse of local creative musicians," say organizers, featuring Anna Patton on clarinet, Don Anderson on trumpet, Eugene Uman on piano, Wes Brown on bass, and Ben James on drum set in addition to Gerstin's percussion. They will present a preview of their upcoming recording, *Songbirds of the Deep Sea*.

"The music is full of melody and wit, creative improvisations and thoughtful compositions, burning percussion grooves and heartfelt melodies," according to a news release. "Based in jazz, it draws on Gerstin's lifelong immersion in music of Africa and the Caribbean, and recent explorations in Balkan and Arabic traditions."

Gerstin explains the guiding concept of the new music. "Imagine being deep under the waves, watching fantastic creatures swim in and out of sight, amazing to see but never staying," he said. "That's music. Always surprising and unknowable."

"The music's varied sounds evoke Afro-Cuban rumba, Barcelona street fairs, lightning and thunder, a talking forest," say organizers. Drums from Cuba and Martinique mix with rhythms of Gerstin's own invention. "There's straight-ahead funky jazz too."

Gerstin began studying traditional African and Caribbean drumming in the 1970s, but at the same time apprenticed with avant-garde jazz master

Milford Graves. His interests continue to explore both ends of the spectrum. He has studied and performed traditional music in Martinique, Cuba, and Ghana, and played with experimental jazz artists Joel Harrison and Eddie Gale.

He says he also loves the communal spirit of playing for dancers, and has worked with Afropop bands Kotoja and Zulu Spear, punk artist Richard Hell, New Orleans brass bands and zydeco groups, samba and salsa ensembles. Currently, he appears with the Puerto Rican traditional drumming group Bomba de Aquí, and leads that group's jazz manifestation, Bombajazeando.

Gerstin also teaches the Latin Jazz and samba ensembles at the Vermont Jazz Center, which are always open to new students.

Anna Patton, clarinet, fronts the contraband band Elixir, is the brains behind the Zara Bode Little Big Band, and leads the 16-voice women's jazz choir The Soubrettes. Patton is an in-demand musician and instructor nationally in the contraband scene,

but is no strict traditionalist. She says she also delights in experimental improvisation.

Trumpeter Don Anderson is a salsa veteran, currently working with Joe Veléz's Creación, and anchors the first trumpet chair in the Vermont Jazz Center Big Band. "His soulful and imaginative improvising lends breadth and depth to the sextet," say organizers.

Eugene Uman, piano, is director of the Vermont Jazz Center as well as a composer and bandleader. He has deep roots in jazz, rock, and Latin music, and has performed with Bo Diddley, Sheila Jordan, Sonny Fortune, Bobby Sanabria, and many others. Living part-time in Colombia, Uman brings that country's rhythms to his playing.

Bassist Wes Brown has perhaps the deepest jazz pedigree in the group: his first professional gig, at age 18, was two years on the road with pianist Earl "Fatha" Hines. Brown has also worked with a stellar array of contemporary experimentalists: Anthony Braxton, Marilyn Crispell, and Wadada Leo Smith, as well as led

the reggae group Rebel Nation. He says his expansive musical imagination draws on Indian and African rhythms, Broadway tunes, and classical piano.

Ben James, drum set, has performed with musicians ranging from Nigerian drummer Olatunji to avant-garde jazz saxophonist John Tchicai, to rocker Nels Cline.

Admission to the concert is \$20, but no one will be turned away for lack of funds.

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BMC BRATTLEBORO MUSIC CENTER

Lio Kuok-Wai
piano

Robert Schumann: Kinderszenen Op.15, Kreisleriana Op.16, Fantasie Op.17

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National Poetry Month celebrated with 'Poems Around Town'

BRATTLEBORO—In celebration of the art and craft of poetry, a group of organizations led by Write Action has filled downtown with poems submitted by poets living in the area, throughout the state, or in the tri-state area of southern Vermont.

Commemorating National Poetry Month in April, "Poems Around Town" is co-sponsored by Brooks Memorial Library and the Brattleboro Literary Festival, with the participation of numerous downtown businesses in whose shop windows the poems will appear through the entire month.

Poets whose work is up range from the well-known

—including two past Vermont poets laureate, Sydney Lea and Chard deNiord — to those who have only recently discovered their poet's voice.

A site guide to the poems can be found at the Brattleboro Food Co-op, Everyone's Books, the Brattleboro Area Chamber of Commerce, Latchis Theatre, and Brooks Memorial Library.

On Saturday, April 27 at 2 p.m., poets will participate in an in-person reading at Brooks Memorial Library, featuring many of those whose works are represented in Poetry Around Town.

More details on the reading will be announced.

Pianist Lio Kuok-Wai featured at midday BMC scholarship benefit concert

BRATTLEBORO—Pianist Lio Kuok-Wai performs at the Brattleboro Music Center Monday, April 15, at 1 p.m. in a concert benefiting BMC Music School scholarships.

Admission is by donation. The program will include Robert Schumann's "Kinderszenen," Op. 15; "Kreisleriana," Op. 16; and "Fantasie," Op. 17.

"Praised by the *Vancouver Sun* as a 'musician's musician,'" organizers write in a press release, "the Macau-born pianist's dedication, intelligence, and artistic accomplishments have already earned him a splendid reputation in the classical music field."

A graduate of the Curtis Institute of Music under Gary

Graffman, Kuok-Wai is a recipient of the Avery Fisher Career Grant administered by Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts, the Career Advancement Award given by the Musical Fund Society of Philadelphia, Scholarship Awards by the Macau Cultural Affairs Bureau, and the Feltzman Piano Foundation.

Since his concerto debut at age 10 with the Macau Orchestra at the opening ceremony of the Macau Arts Festival in 2000, Kuok-Wai has performed with orchestras that include the China Philharmonic, Hong Kong Philharmonic, Camerata Salzburg, Kansas City Symphony Orchestra, Hangzhou Philharmonic Orchestra, Houston Symphony Orchestra, and conductors Li Xincao, Edo de Waart, Francois Xavier-Roth, and Michael Stern.

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BMC BRATTLEBORO MUSIC CENTER

Eloise & Company with Rachel Aucoin

Becky Tracy, fiddle, octave fiddle, and vocals;
Rachel Bell, accordion and vocals; Rachel Aucoin, piano and vocals

Friday, April 12 • 7 pm
BMC 72 Blanche Moyse Way, Brattleboro, VT
Tickets: \$20 in advance, \$25 at the door.
Reduced price tickets are available, please call the BMC for info.

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Next Stage hosts acoustic duos Ordinary Elephant, Early Risers

PUTNEY—Next Stage Arts and Twilight Music present an evening of acoustic folk music from far and near by Louisiana-based Ordinary Elephant and Putney-based Early Risers at Next Stage, 15 Kimball Hill, on Friday, April 12, at 7:30 p.m.

Folk duo Ordinary Elephant has spent the better part of the last decade on a never-ending tour that's earned Crystal and Pete Damore critical acclaim and made fans of luminaries like Tom Paxton and Mary Gauthier. In 2017, the couple took home the International Folk Music

Award for Artist of the Year on the strength of their breakout album *Before I Go*; and, two years later, they returned with the similarly lauded *Honest*, which the Associated Press hailed as "one of the best Americana albums of the year."

According to the artists' website, the duo's new self-titled CD showcases "the arresting power of the couple's gorgeous harmonies and intricate fretwork. The songs are timeless, rooted in rich, character-driven storytelling, and the performances are similarly transportive, fueled by delicately

intertwined banjo, guitar, and octave mandolin." It's the sound of "sincerity and commitment," they say, "of patience and gratitude, of learning to let go of expectation and revel in the simple beauty of the moment."

Early Risers are the Vermont-based folk duo of Ashley Storrow and Putnam Smith. Both rootsy and lyric-driven, their original songs feature close vocal harmonies and arrangements on an array of instruments: banjo, guitar, mandolin, piano, and shruti box.

After pursuing separate solo singer-songwriter careers, they

joined forces in 2015 and have since toured across the country, from Maine to Texas, California to Vancouver. Their debut album, *Making Life Sweet*, went to No. 1 on the national Folk DJ Charts in November 2019.

Tickets are \$20 in advance, \$25 at the door, and \$10 for access to the livestream. Advance tickets are available at nextstagearts.org. Next Stage will provide a beer, wine, and cocktail cash bar. For information, call 802-387-0102.

Student art

project and how different age groups are able to participate.

Students are working on responding to music through abstract art, creating instruments focusing on the idea of vibrations and sound waves, building drums out of papier-mâché and found objects, and creating touch boards.

"One of the themes we thought about was accessibility of the arts, because the person highlighted in the book can't hear but she likes to become a perfect professional percussionist."

Students thought about how an art show would be for someone who couldn't see. "That part of the show, people wanted to touch the relief so they can experience it," Paugh says.

Paugh explained that the older students are creating rain sticks, focusing on considering how objects of different sizes can move through a space and create different sounds based on their vibrations.

The younger students are making macaracas and filling them with various objects.



Three students create rain sticks. The objective: to learn how objects of different sizes can move through a space and create different sounds based on their vibrations.

FROM SECTION FRONT

Impacting younger artists

"I think it's pretty rare that youth and young artists are taken seriously and displayed in real gallery spaces... usually it's classroom art shows in the hallway on bulletin boards," Paugh says.

The older students get their work taken more seriously, she

says, and are given more of a professional space for their work to be displayed in.

"I think they feel really proud to see their work hanging and seeing strangers looking at it and reacting to it and responding to it. [...] I feel very lucky that we're able to do it for our community."

Paugh has always taught

elementary students. "I've always really loved the willingness to jump in with both feet that most kids have. [...] I can give them all different artistic and creative challenges, different new materials, and they're pretty much pumped for it all," Paugh explained.

"It's kind of like you explore it with them, which is really fun."

The Crowell Art Gallery is in the rear of the Moore Free Library, a nonprofit private library reliant on charitable donations, grants, and community support. The gallery is open during the library's operating hours: Tuesday, Wednesday, Friday, 1 to 5 p.m.; Thursday, 1 to 6 p.m.; and Saturday, 10 a.m. to 1 p.m.

Mosaic Project

community."

For locals, "the mural will be a direct reminder of how we as individuals all contribute to the town's unique creative culture."

The mosaic project launched in late fall with a community gathering led by commissioned artists Mary Lacy and Corrine Yonce ["A space for social connection and contemplation," Arts, Dec. 13, 2023].

Each artist has an "impressive background in creating large-scale mural projects and mosaics that involve community engagement and social practice," the release continues. The installation depends on a range of donations, from the found objects and cast-offs that will compose the mural to the hands-on creation of the mosaic — an art form that dates back nearly 5,000 years.

After the initial gathering last fall, a brainstorming session yielded a theme: water.

"We have the Connecticut River, and with climate change and the flooding and how rainy it's been, water's on everyone's minds," Mohr says.

"It was really kind of fun to hear people's ideas — to hear their

memories of the space — what they like about Brattleboro, how they want the mural to reflect the culture of Brattleboro and what that is for many different people," she continues.

"I love that aspect of what the finished piece will be — everyone who's contributed can come in and find their individual contributions within an entirety," Mohr says.

A big break

The next big public event is the Smash Party at Pliny Park on April 13, from 1 to 5 p.m. The press release urges participants "to donate objects and smash ceramics into pieces to be incorporated into the finished mural."

Objects can run the gamut: tiles, plates, beads, buttons, small toys, mirrors, plastic letters, personal trinkets.

"The memories and personal meanings contained within these objects," the news release projects, "will host a conversation among neighbors and strangers, creating a sense of collaboration, intimacy, discovery, and engagement within our shared public space."

"It'll be interesting to see what people bring," says Mohr, noting that a lot of "amazing" area ceramicists have joined the brainstorming and will be donating "beautiful seconds."

"They want to be part of the process, to learn from the artists how the mosaic mural will be created," she says.

Mohr adds: "If it ends up raining, we might do it at Epsilon in the community space. I just really like the idea of doing it in Pliny Park because of visibility, but also so people can imagine what's going to happen. And we'll have chalk, too, so people can draw on the actual wall."

Overcoming 'weird hurdles'

The wall, which previously boasted a mural by area artist Terry Sylvester, "is owned by the Chamber of Commerce, which has given us their blessing as a partner. The Chamber is very supportive," Mohr says.

Following the smash party, which Mohr says, "but that has a memory attached. We've gotten quite a bit of enthusiastic response so far."

Following the smash party, which Lacy will guide, the public co-creation celebration on Saturday, April 20, from 2 to 5 p.m., will be, Mohr says, "where the artists will show people how to take the tiling and create designs that will later be added to the wall."

She describes it as "a different kind of event," but says that the artists have found with past projects that "it's very meditative, and people begin talking and relating, so that'll be a very socially cohesive experience."

"We will have tables set up at Epsilon Spire so folks can sit and converse while sorting," she says.

"Part of the inspiration for the project is that [Pliny Park] is a little foreboding right now," Mohr notes. "If more people come in to enjoy it, it will be something for everyone. And [the mosaic mural] might change the character and the feel of it."

FROM SECTION FRONT

Pliny Park itself is owned by the town's Recreation & Parks Department, which has enforced permitting and fee requirements — what Mohr describes as "weird hurdles that make it harder for people to have an impact."

"But I want this to at least be an example that things can get done and you can push through, and then hopefully it'll be like the High Street Mural," Mohr says, referencing the 2022 community mural project on the nearby retaining wall. "People loved that so much — even folks who were critical of the idea have come around to be supportive and are really happy it happened."

Mohr says that if all goes as planned and the needed funds are raised, the process will be completed in June, when Lacy and Yonce will co-create the mosaic mural with the objects donated, smashed, sorted, and arranged by the public.

For Brattleboro's July Gallery Walk, Mohr adds, "we'll do kind of an unofficial ribbon-cutting celebration."

More than 280 have signed up to participate, "so if each of them gave 20 bucks we'd be over our goal of \$7,986."

As of April 8, 26% of that goal has been met.

Mohr hopes to see donations of any amount at each upcoming event.

Through a Better Places grant from the state Agency of Commerce and Community Development, every donation is doubly matched, meaning that a \$25 gift becomes \$75 — and a big boon to the Brattleboro community spirit and aesthetic.

And, says Mohr in the release, "there are some fun perks for each giving level, ranging from stickers, mail art, and screen prints to sponsoring an 8-by-8 inch tile or special message."

"We are trying to get everyone to donate, because if we don't reach the goal, it won't happen," Mohr warns.

"And I'll have lots of pieces of broken ceramics [to deal with]," she adds with a laugh.

To donate to the mural project, visit patronicity.com/project/mosaic_mural_in_pliny_park (patronicity.com/project/mosaic_mural_in_pliny_park#!). For more on this project and the work and programming of Epsilon Spire, visit epsilonspires.org.

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VOICES LIVE! FORUM

Crushing the housing crisis

What defines the housing crisis in Vermont, and what are some of the ideas that people are putting into place to address the problems? A community discussion.

FOLLOWING ARE excerpts of a conversation about housing that took place virtually on March 18 as part of *The Commons'* Voices Live! series, which seeks to bring people together into a forum about difficult community topics and then, in turn, bring the conversation to a larger audience in the pages of the Voices section.

As framed by moderator Joyce Marcel, a frequent contributor to *The Commons* as a reporter and columnist writing on politics, housing, and homelessness, "the housing problem as we know it is a national problem, it's not a Brattleboro problem, and the solutions are many. Here, we are wrestling with: Why are we in this mess? And does it even matter? Or, What do we do about Act 250 — is the land use protection act hindering housing construction? Should we protect it?"

Other questions that the topic raises: "What kind of housing do we want? High-end? Affordable? Section 8? Do we want houses? Do we want apartments? Are they in the village centers or in the fields?"

And then there's the question of who would qualify for this housing.

"Housing for seniors is a very big issue all of a sudden," Marcel said. "I'm a senior now, and I'm living out in the middle of the woods on a dirt road. This is not going to be viable in another 10 years. Where do I go? There's no place in town.

"What about the "not in my backyard" folks who don't like change?"

"Or, my favorite question of all," Marcel said. "Do we just let the boomers die, and then there'll be lots of housing? There'll be a glut! It's an issue, and we've got a lot to say about it."

Vermont's U.S. representative, Becca Balint, discussed the Community Housing Act, a bill she recently filed, and she discussed how the legislation would address the housing crisis as well as the merits of drafting potential laws that have very little practical chance of seeing any action in the current Republican-controlled House of Representatives.

In the second half of the forum, a coterie of Brattleboro area professionals who are working toward solutions to the housing crisis — Chris Company, Christine Hart, Sue Fillion, Craig Miskovich, and Jason Van Nest — discussed some of the demographic and economic forces that are creating the difficult housing situation.

Brattleboro



Top row: Craig Miskovich, Sue Fillion, Jason Van Nest. Second row: Christine Hart, Chris Company, Becca Balint. Right: Moderator Joyce Marcel.

'We don't have enough money in Vermont alone to help tackle that issue'

Rep. Balint files federal legislation to address the issue of providing enough housing at the national level, with hope of building bipartisan support

BECCA BALINT, U.S. representative (D-Vt.): I hear about the shortage of housing from Vermonters in every corner of the state, and it's very important to me and my whole team to work together to find solutions.

I recently introduced the Community Housing Act. It's federal legislation designed to tackle some of the biggest barriers to addressing our housing crisis both in Vermont and of course, nationally, since it is a federal bill. And we are trying to offer some creative solutions and some very big investments.

So it's hundreds of billions of dollars in housing investments — nearly half a trillion dollars. And it is that big, because that's what's needed.

Vermont is feeling it acutely. Other states like New York and California are also feeling it acutely.

Pretty much every congressional district across the nation is dealing with a housing shortage. The estimate is that we are short over three million additional units of housing in order to meet the demand.

That's because housing, as you all know, sits at the nexus of so many of the challenges that we face in our communities: the national workforce crisis, the crushing income disparity, the devastating mental health crisis, our struggles with the opioid epidemic.

Vermonters know that we're in the middle of an acute crisis here, despite the great work that was done in the Legislature, both when I was there and after I left. We did invest millions of state and federal dollars into creating more housing, but we still have a lot more to do.

I hear from Vermonters constantly that they can't find housing, that they're worried that their kids and their grandkids aren't going to be able to stay in the state. And with some of the highest rates of homelessness per capita in the country, we need the power and the resources of the federal government to help. We don't have enough money in Vermont alone to help tackle that issue.

I always like to ground the conversation in the fact that housing is the foundation upon which all of our lives are built. We have to have access to safe housing, because it offers working families stability and opportunities that they need to succeed in whatever line of work

Voices LIVE
A NOTE ON PROCESS: In the interests of the reader, text has been edited for clarity and concision in a way that intended to preserve the participants' meaning, ideas, and fundamental self-expression. In the interest of readability, this is not a full transcript. We encourage readers interested in engaging with these issues to view the original Voices Live! forum video at brattleborotv.org.
As always, we want this not to be the last word on any of these issues — just the first. Reader responses are welcome at voices@commonsnews.org.

workers move from one part of Vermont to another to get better opportunities. If the housing isn't there, that's holding them back. And, of course, when we look at the mental health crisis and treatment of substance use disorder, safe and secure housing is completely at the center of getting people the help that everyone needs and deserves.

It's not just in our cities and our population centers — it's important that this bill offers some solutions for rural areas as well. Rural Vermonters are seeing a reduction in housing stock, because of the influx [of buyers] coming from the pandemic and post-pandemic.

So much of our housing stock is old. Across the country, we've also seen skyrocketing rents, because we have some predatory landlords and hedge funds buying up houses and rentals, and then essentially price fixing, which I can talk a little bit more about later.

So I'm very proud to have introduced this package, but I also know it is not all-inclusive.

A big part of the bill is community-based housing, which would increase the supply of affordable and deeply affordable housing. And we have some provisions in here to help keep renters in their home and keep rents affordable for the long term.

And you also talked about zoning issues and Act 250. We're really trying to incentivize eliminating the barriers to increasing the supply of housing. We've also included massive investments in the housing trust fund, to tap into the land trust model and shared equity model.

We don't need just short-term solutions — we need housing that is going to be affordable over the long term. The bill also increases a fee that is assessed on the [mortgage underwriting] work that Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac do, and that additional fee will go directly into the housing trust fund so we have a stable source of income going forward, and it will provide grants to states like Vermont to produce and preserve housing for low- and very-low-income families.

The rural-specific programs are also important for keeping Vermonters housed. Rural America is often left behind, so we have to make investments at the federal level that are not just geared toward population centers.

These investments [would help] individuals and families, but we know that making investments in housing also helps communities as a whole. That's why I'm here, to hear directly from our constituents. We want your feedback and we want to hear specifically: What are you seeing and experiencing in the housing market? And what else could we do at the federal level to help address our housing crisis?

JOYCE MARCEL: I just need some specific idea of what we're

talking about here. What are we talking about? What's actually going to happen?

BALINT: So there are many, many parts of the bill. We have something called the Housing Trust Fund, and it grants money to states to produce and preserve low- and very-low-income housing. We are wanting to invest \$450 billion.

And a lot of times in Congress you worry about the long-term solution for funding something like that, about the need to have a constant influx of cash to be able to grant out to states to build more housing. So we have proposed in this bill to increase a financial fee on Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac, which would set aside additional money that would then flow into the housing trust fund. We'd grant this constant influx of cash to states for them to be able to build more what we call affordable and deeply-affordable [housing].

We'd also invest \$150 billion in the capital management fund, and this would give community development financial institutions money to focus on low-income communities to help finance loans that support affordable housing.

The top line is that there are essentially three buckets in the bill to make huge investments to increase the supply of housing. We know the housing market, from top to bottom, is short millions of units. So there are many, many provisions in here to literally increase the supply of housing.

Then we have rental supports in this bill to keep people housed when they may be struggling to pay rent. So we look at the Emergency Rental Assistance Program that was very successful during the pandemic, and we would make that a permanent fund to directly assist people when they come up short on their rent. We also would provide eviction protection grants.

So these are the three big buckets: building more housing, provisions to keep people housed, and increasing housing availability for rural renters.

Some price fixing is going on across the country with rental units. Many larger housing investors use [property management software] RealPage, which allows them to price-fix rental prices across a huge area of land, which of course makes it very difficult for people to feel like they're in any kind of a competitive market.

So we would charge the Department of Housing and Urban Development with making a database that landlords would have to send their information to so we can keep track through our antitrust work to make sure they wouldn't be price-fixing.

We're also excited about charging HUD and the Health and Human Services Division to come together to create a task force to figure out, How do we coordinate getting people substance use disorder treatment when they're in affordable housing? There are limitations to what can be done in terms of medical interventions in housing, and we feel like that has been a barrier which has prevented people from staying housed.

MARCEL: Wow. OK, that's... that's quite a lot.
BALINT: Yeah, it's a big bill.

JOYCE MARCEL: I just need some specific idea of what we're

■ STORY CONTINUES

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COLUMN | Sports Roundup

Bears win Unified basketball home opener

I can't recall ever seeing a coach wearing the colors of their team's opponent, but Brattleboro Unified basketball coach Tyler Boone likes to do things a little differently.

Twin Valley is offering Unified basketball for the first time this year. The Wildcats played their debut game at home against the Burr & Burton Bulldogs on April 1, and on April 5, played their first road game against the Bears at the BUHS gym.

Boone wanted to make the Wildcats feel welcome, which explains why they were wearing a Twin Valley hoodie on the sideline during the game and introduced each of the Twin Valley players and coaches to the fans during halftime. It was yet another example of the excellent sportsmanship that is a big part of the Unified sports experience.

"It was awesome," said Twin Valley co-coach Andy Oyer. "It was a nice touch."

Being neighborly has its limits, however, and the Bears made sure they took care of business and held on for a 38-36 victory.

Twin Valley was coming off a 52-20 loss to the Bulldogs, who were last season's state runners-up, while Brattleboro won its April 1 opener at Springfield, 55-44.

Boone tried something different for the Twin Valley game and started ninth-graders Alexx LaBounty and Caden Russell. "They really impressed me," Boone said. "They'll be a big help for us this season."

But it was the returning players for the Bears, such as speedy guard Austin Pinette and burly forward Jeffery White, who helped carry the load against the Wildcats. Pinette was the high scorer with 12 points, while White scored four points and pulled down several rebounds.

The Bears led the game all the way. A three-pointer by Tyler Bolduc, a pair of lay-ins by Pinette, and baskets by Ashley Cleveland and LaBounty, gave Brattleboro an 11-4 lead after one quarter.

Twin Valley responded in the second quarter with a pair of baskets from Thomas Richard, with Nathaniel Hernandez, Brogan Boyce, and John-Michael Richard also chipping in on offense to cut the Bears' lead down to 18-16 at halftime. A three-pointer from Bolduc, and baskets from White and LaBounty accounted for all of the Bears' offense.

Brattleboro pulled away in the third quarter as Pinette, Russell, White, and Cleveland contributed to a 14-6 run that gave the Bears a 32-22 lead. But once again, the Wildcats rallied back as Thomas Richard and Trevor Morris-Boyd each had a pair of baskets, and Chloe Lashway added another during a 10-4 run that cut the Bears' lead to 36-32 with 1:37 to play in the final quarter.

Brady Lackey and Pinette then traded baskets to maintain the Bears' four-point lead. John-Michael Richard scored with six seconds left to get the Wildcats within two, but they ran out of time and the Bears hung on for the win.

It was an unexpectedly exciting game, and the two teams will meet again on April 11 in Whitingham.

Rec. Dept. announces summer camp schedules

It's not too soon to be thinking about summer sports camps, and the Brattleboro Recreation & Parks Department will be offering a variety of



RANDOLPH T. HOLHUT, deputy editor of this newspaper, has written this column since 2010 and has covered sports in Windham County since the 1980s. Readers can send him sports information at news@commonsnews.org.

options for local youths.

- Youth basketball camp for those entering grades 1-8 will run from June 24-28. Grades 1-4 will meet from 9 a.m. to noon and grades 5-8 will meet from 1 to 4 p.m. Both sections have a maximum capacity of 20 kids.

This camp will take place at the Gibson-Aiken Center and will be run by Jason Coplan. The fee for this camp is \$130 for Brattleboro residents and \$145 for nonresidents. Participants will take part in skills and drills that will help increase the level of play and understanding of the game. Players will take part in various forms of competition, but no player will be forced to participate if they do not feel comfortable. Campers should bring sneakers and a water bottle.

- A track & field program for youths between age 6 and 14 will be offered from June 25 through July 20 on Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays, from 6 to 7 p.m., at the Brattleboro Union High School track complex. The fee is \$35 for Brattleboro residents and \$50 for non-Brattleboro residents.

Participants will do dashes, sprints, middle- and long-distance running, and relays, as well as long jump, shot put, discus, hurdles, and softball toss. Participants should wear comfortable shoes and bring a water bottle.

- Baseball camp will be offered this summer at Living Memorial Park on the Lower Softball/Baseball Field.

Session one, for grades 1-3, will run from July 15-19. Session Two, for those grades 4-6, will run from July 22-26. Both sessions will run from 9

a.m. to noon. The fee is \$130 for Brattleboro residents and \$145 for nonresidents.

At this camp, participants will be trained in the fundamentals of baseball. Each camper will receive personal attention to help improve their skills through the use of proper playing habits. Experienced coaches will use their knowledge to help players take the next step in their baseball development. All participants must come with a glove, cleats or sneakers, and a bat (if you own one).

- Softball camp will take place at Living Memorial Park on the Lower Softball/Baseball Field. This camp is for those in grades 3-8 and will run from 9 a.m. to noon on July 8-12. The fee is \$130 for Brattleboro residents and \$145 for nonresidents.

With a focus on fundamentals, this softball camp will help participants develop good habits and proper technique. Instructors Jay Cudworth and Erin Cooke will help increase knowledge of the game, and build confidence at the plate. All participants are required to come with glove, cleats or sneakers, a bat (if you own one), a water bottle, and a snack for a morning break.

- Gymnastics camp will be held at the Gibson-Aiken Center for those 5-14 years old. Camp weeks will be held as follows: Week 1: June 24-28, Week 2: July 1-5 (no class on July 4), Week 3: July 8-12, Week 4: July 15-19, Week 5: July 22-26th, Week 6: July 29-Aug. 2, and Week 7: Aug. 5-9.

The fee for Week 1 and Weeks 3-7 is \$115 for Brattleboro residents and \$130 for non-residents. The fee for Week 2 is \$92 for Brattleboro residents and \$107 for non-residents. Camp runs from 9 a.m. (sharp) to noon, Monday-Friday. Participants should bring a nutritious snack, and a water bottle, and wear tight-fitting clothes. The instructors are Amanda Montgomery and Karen Gallivan.

- The Recreation & Parks Department and the New England Skateboarding Association will offer a skateboarding camp for those 8-12 years old from July 15-19,



Brattleboro's Jamieson Crochetiere (16) celebrates after scoring a basket against Twin Valley in the second half of their Unified basketball game on April 5 at the BUHS gym.

from 9 a.m. to noon, at Living Memorial Park's Perseverance Skate Park.

The fee is \$175 for Brattleboro residents and \$190 for non-Brattleboro residents. Participants should bring sneakers, skateboards, a helmet, elbow and knee pads, a snack, and water bottle. Equipment is not provided.

- National Senior Games Champion Gurudharm Khalsa will lead a Pickleball camp for those in grades 5-12 at the Living Memorial Park Tennis Courts. Camp for grades 5-8 will be held July 15-19, from 4 to 5:30 p.m. Camp for grades 9-12 will be held July 22-26, from 4 to 5:30 p.m. The fee for this camp is \$50 for Brattleboro residents and \$65 for non-residents.

Participants will learn the basic fundamentals of the game, including the underhand serve, the drive, the dink, and the volley. Campers will work their way to learn the basic rules of the game for doubles play, and some elements of strategy. Warmups, stretching, agility, and mobility drills will be included. Bring a pickleball paddle if you have one and a water bottle.

- Individuals can register online at vtbrattleboroweb.myvscloud.com/webtrac/web, and click on "Summer Camps and Programs," or in person at the Gibson-Aiken Center on Main Street. For all programs, events, facility information, and more, visit Brattleboro.gov. Once you are on this page, hover over the "Departments" tab found on the blue horizontal bar. A new drop-down menu will appear and click "Recreation and Parks."

If there are special accommodations required for these programs, let the Rec. Dept. know at least five days in advance. For more information, call the Gibson-Aiken Office at 802-254-5808.

Watch your step on the trails

Despite two recent major snowstorms, mud season conditions remain on Vermont's

mountains and trails. The Green Mountain Club (GMC) reminds hikers that high-elevation trails on state land are now closed through May.

The GMC noted in a news release that the start of mud season for the trails has historically been April 15, but it's been trending earlier in recent years.

"This year, with such a mild winter, we saw mud season-equivalent conditions in every month of meteorological winter. And with sustained above-freezing temperatures throughout March, a messy mud season is here to stay. Even 20 inches of snow on the mountains in mid-March fell upon muddy, thawed ground, so mud season conditions are quick to return," according to the GMC. Hiking on muddy trails makes them more susceptible to erosion, and hiking around muddy sections widens the trail and tramples trailside vegetation. The GMC advises hikers to seek out low elevation trails and durable surfaces during mud season. Dirt roads and rail trails statewide make for great long walks.

They also advise hikers to stay flexible and adaptable. Muddy conditions can exist any month of the year, so if you encounter significant mud on your way to a trailhead or summit, consider turning around and finding an alternative place to hike. If you do continue, hike directly through mud to protect the land around the trail. Wear waterproof boots, gaiters, and use hiking poles to improve stability.

You can check recent trail reports on forums such as Hiking in Vermont ([facebook.com/groups/greenmountainclub](https://www.facebook.com/groups/greenmountainclub)), or post an honest trip report of your own to help other hikers and spread responsible trail stewardship. Visit greenmountainclub.org for more information.

Vermont's trout season opens April 13

Vermont's trout fishing season opens Saturday, April 13, and, despite lingering snow cover in many areas,

the Vermont Fish and Wildlife Department says anglers can still have fun and be successful early in the season if they keep a few strategies in mind.

"Just like any other time of year, anglers fishing early in the spring should adjust their tactics based on conditions," State Fisheries Biologist Shawn Good said in a news release. "Trout will become more active with warmer water temperatures. If you can find a good location and present your bait or lure without spooking the trout, you'll have a good chance of catching a few fish, and enjoy a nice day outside."

Good says finding a small- to medium-low-elevation river or stream that is not too murky from spring runoff can be key. Trout are coldblooded and may be slow to bite especially with low water temperatures, so it is important that they can also see your bait, lure, or fly.

While Vermont offers excellent and diverse fishing opportunities for wild trout, stocking also occurs in many lakes, ponds, streams, and rivers where wild trout populations are low or absent. This generally happens each year once the ice has melted and following spring runoff.

Good reminds anglers to check the department's website frequently as updates are made to the Trout Stocking page. Visit anrweb.vt.gov/FWD/FW/FishStockingSchedule.aspx and click the "See What's Been Stocked" button to stay informed as the spring progresses. Also, check the 2024 Vermont Fishing Guide and Regulations, which is available free from license agents or online at eregulations.com/vermont/fishing. A helpful overview of the fishing regulations can be found at vtfishandwildlife.com.

Senior bowling roundup

- Week 14 of the winter/spring season of the Brattleboro Senior Bowling League at Brattleboro Bowl on April 4 was postponed due to snow. They'll be back in action this week.



Brattleboro's Caden Russell (6) chases down a loose ball as Twin Valley's Nathaniel Hernandez (12) looks on during the first half of their Unified basketball game on April 5 in the BUHS gym.

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